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ABSTRACT

Many students today face barriers to learning such as physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Others are exposed to violence, substance abuse, or poor relationships in their home and community. North Eugene (Oregon) High School is trying to combat these barriers to learning with anger-management classes. These classes not only stress the inappropriateness of certain behaviors, but offer students options for expressing their anger. The 9-week class meets every weekday for 90 minutes. The class is a mix of students with severe and less serious problems who are either placed in the class or volunteer for it. Students learn how to respond to different situations and provocative statements by others. Each class period students bring problems before the group for discussion. Students also learn to be attuned to early warnings of reactions to negative situations. Learning to remove oneself from a situation, either physically or emotionally, is another skill students learn. Thinking of consequences of negative behavior, positive reinforcement, and role playing are other skills students learn. Peer support and pressure as well as guest speakers also help students learn how to manage anger. Other Lane County (Oregon) high and middle schools have similar anger-management programs. (JPT)

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Class Teaches Students to Cope with Anger

BY LINDA LUMSDEN

Many students today are saddled with "baggage" of staggering proportions. Some have been victimized physically, sexually, or emotionally. Others witness frequent physical violence between their parents. Still others have parents who suffer from alcohol- or other drug-related problems. Divorce also leaves grief, sadness, and anger in its wake in some homes, while trying to integrate a stepparent can create turmoil in other families.

Financial problems frequently compound existing stressors; in some families the budget is stretched so thin that students don't get enough to eat. Some youths are kicked out of their homes. For others, life at home is so unbearable that living on the streets seems like a better option. And a few students feel so hopeless and alone that they opt out of life itself.

Why an Anger Management Class Is Necessary

Growing up is challenging enough under normal conditions. But maintaining some semblance of self-esteem can be a monumental task for students who do not find themselves in a relatively stable, nurturing environment. Students who have been dealt a barrage of problems may justifiably feel "ripped off,"

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Instead of merely underscoring to kids that certain behavior is unacceptable, one class at North Eugene High School enlarges the repertoire of responses students have at their disposal when they begin to feel anger well up within them.

sensing that they have not received their fair share of some of the ingredients that make it easier for people to feel good about themselves at a "gut" level. One way some students attempt to obtain a sense of control in the midst of a personal world that may seem largely beyond their control is through fighting or intimidating others. Especially vulnerable to this pattern are students who come from families where it is the norm to settle disagreements or express anger physically rather than verbally.

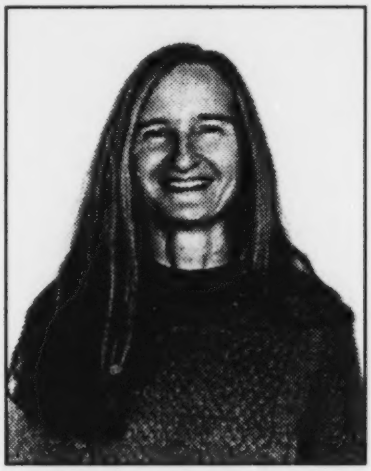
As violence and other forms of out-of-control behavior by students have escalated in our schools, educators have sought ways to curb them. Many schools have responded by tightening the rules or instituting more severe consequences when students violate the conduct code. However, North Eugene High School is going a step further than most schools in its effort to turn the tide. Instead of merely underscoring to kids that certain behavior is unacceptable, one class at North enlarges the repertoire of responses students have at their disposal when they begin to feel anger well up within them. After both learning and practicing new ways of managing their behavior in the safe context of the class, the ultimate goal is for kids to be able to transfer these skills to a variety of interpersonal situations.

Facilitated by Bob Cunningham, the anger-management class is in its third year. It is designed to teach students ways to break their own cycle of anger and deal effectively with others. The class is also intended to be a place where students give support to and receive support from one another. The majority of students are from troubled backgrounds, but occasionally there are students from nonviolent, stable backgrounds who simply lack conflict-resolution skills that don't involve violence or intimidation.

Student Selection and Composition

The nine-week class meets every weekday for an hour-and-a-half. Currently, it has seventeen members. Some students hear about the class through friends and voluntarily decide to sign up for it. Others are referred by administrators, nurses, and counselors at North. In a few instances, kids end up in the class because a judge mandates their attendance.

Cunningham, in consultation with other administrators at North, ultimately decides which kids to accept into the class each term. He has found the class functions best when it is comprised of a mix of students. Cunningham commented, "You wouldn't want a group of all 5's [those students with the most



Linda Lumsden *is associate editor of the Oregon School Study Council.*

serious problems]; on the other hand, neither would you want a class of all 0's [those with relatively fewer problems]."

SED—severely emotionally disturbed—is an educational label that some members of the class have had pinned on them at some point during their school career. Other students arrive with the acronym ADD or ADHD—attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactive disorder. Despite the labels, however, in Cunningham's anger-management class, where students sit in a large circle on metal folding chairs for ninety minutes, no one seems to have much difficulty paying attention to what's going on.

Learning New Ways to Resolve Conflict

And what exactly does go on in a typical class session? Part of each class meeting is spent discussing specific issues that students want or need to deal with. At the beginning of each period, Cunningham polls class members to see who has an issue to bring before the group that day. He then reserves time for each student to talk about their issue and receive feedback and support from the group.

Invitations

Early in the term, students are schooled in how to identify different types of *invitations*; they then practice skills that equip them to respond effectively to these invitations. An *invitation*, explained Cunningham, is some type of expression by another person, either verbal or nonverbal, that can make you feel positive or negative and that requires a response. For example, the statement "You're a good friend" would be categorized as a *positive verbal invitation*, while "I hate your guts!" would be classified as a *negative verbal invitation.* A *positive nonverbal invitation* could be a "high five," a pat on the back, or a smile. Examples of *negative nonverbal invitations* include giving someone "the finger," glaring at them, or spitting on them.

Early Warning System

Once students are readily able to classify behaviors into types of invitations, Cunningham teaches them to become attuned to their *early warning system*, signs that alert them that they are starting to get upset in response to a negative invitation, also sometimes referred to as a "trigger event" or antecedent. Warning signs take two basic forms—bodily sensations and emotional states.

Everyone has an early warning system and everyone's early warning system is different. One person attuned to bodily warning signs may notice a "knot" tighten in their stomach; others may clench their teeth or feel their heart start to beat rapidly. Those more in touch with emotional changes may experience warning signs such as growing irritation, frustration, or embarrassment. Tuning in to their own unique signal or set of signals is one process students engage in to assess how they are feeling in the initial stages of an uncomfortable interaction. Early detection of specific internal cues leaves students with more options when they are considering how to respond to a situation.

Taking Space

At this point, students are advised to *take space*. Physically leaving is one way of "taking space." A student may say something like, "I feel uncomfortable right now and when I feel this way I sometimes make poor choices so I'm going to leave for a few minutes and then come back." Another way of taking space is to space out in your head. For example, if a student feels a teacher is "in their face" about something, and the student is not at liberty to leave the classroom, mentally checking out may be the best avenue for taking space.

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Attention Getters

Once a student has taken space, he is taught to use another technique—referred to as an *attention getter*—that focuses all his energy on himself instead of on the person that he is feeling anger toward. The student calls into consciousness an important personal goal that could be sacrificed or a possible negative consequence that could accrue to him if he allows his anger to get out of control. For example, if maintaining eligibility on the football team is a priority for one student, to get his own attention he might visualize himself being told by the coach that he has been kicked off the football team for some type of out-of-control expression of his anger. This image may be the primary attention getter this individual relies on to break his anger cycle.

For a student who has a close, significant relationship with one or both parents, the desire to avoid hurting that person emotionally or disrupting that relationship may come into play. The attention getter for such a student may be visualizing how their parents' faces would look upon being notified by the principal that their son or daughter had been kicked out of school. Similarly, other students may picture lights of a police car, or a judge's face sentencing them in court. Students who respond more strongly to auditory rather than visual cues may imagine the sound of a police siren or repeat a word to themselves, such as "jail," to help interrupt their anger cycle.

Affirmations

Maintaining a focus on self, students then engage in internally recited affirmations to bring themselves back to neutral emotional ground and build themselves up after some kind of negative invitation was directed at them. *Affirmations* are positive, true statements. Thinking to oneself, "I make good decisions" or "I am a good person" are examples of affirmations.

It is important, Cunningham believes, for students to learn to identify the original feeling that a situation triggered in them—the feeling that preceded the anger.

Unhooks

Unhooks, another technique used to interrupt a student's anger cycle, are phrases used to disengage the person emotionally from the situation so they can either break contact with an individual who is triggering angry feelings in them or move into the resolution phase. An unhook helps the student to put the situation in perspective, helps them to adopt the attitude that the situation is not really that significant in the larger scheme of things.

To tap into a sense of how the relative importance of events changes with the passage of time, student may imagine how the situation will seem a month or a year from now; they may even have a phrase that captures this idea, such as "this too shall pass," "a speck on the world," or "a dot on the universe."

"I feel" Statements

In addition to using the techniques mentioned above, students are also encouraged to use *"I feel" statements* when responding to invitations. An "I feel" statement consists of three parts: "I feel [fill in blank] when [fill in blank] because [fill in blank]." Examples would be, "I feel frustrated when I don't do well on tests because I know I'm smart" or "I feel hurt when no one listens to me because I have good things to say." One rule about "I feel" statements is that the stated feeling cannot be anger because anger is considered a secondary feeling, an emotion that occurs after another initial underlying feeling. It is important, Cunningham believes, for students to learn to identify the original feeling that a situation triggered in them—the feeling that preceded the anger. This can be difficult to do because often our initial emotional response—such being hurt, embarrassed, or rejected—stays in our consciousness only fleetingly before being masked, or forced "underground," by a flood of anger.

Role Plays

Role playing is another important component of Cunningham's class. In the safe environment of the classroom, role plays allow students to get practice dealing with many types of situations that "push their buttons." By tailoring role plays to the issues that are most relevant for each student, Cunningham hopes to make it easier for students to handle similar real-life situations. Each role play is videotaped. All students have tapes that feature the role plays they have participated in during the term. Watching themselves on tape is valuable for the students because it allows them to see firsthand how they came across in an interaction. Students may notice things about themselves that they probably weren't aware of

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while a role play was in progress, such as their body language, tone of voice, whether they maintained eye contact with the other person, and so forth.

Self-observations that occur while viewing a videotaped role play can clarify for students areas they want to work on in future role plays and in everyday situations. The videotapes are also beneficial because they document students' progress in dealing with difficult interpersonal encounters.

Thinking Errors

Cunningham also helps students to recognize when they, or others, are making thinking errors. A *thinking error* is a mental mistake in reasoning that causes a person to draw an erroneous conclusion. For example, in a discussion of role models, a student in the class defined a role model as someone who doesn't make mistakes; therefore, he concluded that he was ineligible to be a role model because he sometimes makes mistakes. Cunningham asked the student what thinking error he had just made. The student then reconsidered and revised his original statement, noting that everyone makes some mistakes. After further discussion, class members concluded that perhaps a more accurate definition of a role model is not someone who is free of mistakes but someone who is able to acknowledge their mistakes.

In many instances, thinking errors represent an attempt to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions. Someone, for example, may say, "It was no big deal; I could have killed him," as a way of discounting or minimizing responsibility for their behavior.

Other Components of the Class

Often students are much more aware of things they would like to change about themselves than they are of things about them that are positive. Therefore, in addition to teaching students to say affirmations silently to themselves when they are faced with provocative situations, Cunningham sometimes has students say affirmations out loud to accentuate the positives and promote mutual support, encouragement, and self-esteem among students in the class.

Receiving verbal affirmations from others can help build students' self-esteem and self-confidence by helping them to believe more strongly in the things about them that are good. And giving affirmations can enhance students' appreciation of qualities in others that they admire, respect, or enjoy.

Sometimes Cunningham has one student stand in the center of the circle and give himself an affirmation. Next, each student in the class gives the student in the center an affirmation. By the time an affirmative statement has been made by each class member, the person in the middle has heard about seventeen positive statements about himself.

Mutual Support

Mutual support among the students extends beyond giving and receiving affirmations. For example, when one student shared with the group that he had recently attempted suicide and felt the need for more support than usual, students not only gave him positive affirmations but also, without prompting from Cunningham, passed handwritten notes to him that contained their phone numbers and other supportive messages. Although students are free to call Cunningham if they are in crisis or need special assistance, he said students rely primarily on their peers for support, which he heartily endorses.

Accountability

As well as providing support and encouragement to their peers both inside and outside of class, students also play a part in holding each other accountable and deciding upon consequences for class members who "blow it." For example, after a student in the class took a few dollars worth of pennies from the classroom and then lied to another class member about where the money had come from, Cunningham helped the students to recognize that the most important issue was not the theft but the fact that a violation of trust had occurred. Then the group as a whole, not Cunningham alone, considered how to deal with the matter.

Guest Speakers

Guest speakers are another resource Cunningham integrates into the class. One speaker may give students an overview of family systems theory, describing how the family unit can be viewed as a system in which each person tends to occupy a specific role, such as scapegoat, clown, and so forth. Members of law-enforcement agencies are also sometimes invited

to speak to and dialogue with the students.

In addition, near the end of the term, when students are better equipped to handle potentially upsetting situations, Cunningham has been known to bring in a member of a student's family and then facilitate dialogue between the two individuals. In such cases, students are not told of the arrangement beforehand; they must cope with the situation when they walk into class and come face-to-face with the individual.

Other Anger-Management Programs

Although North Eugene High School has been featured here, a small number of other high schools and middle schools in Lane County also offer anger-management classes. The basic curriculum in many local anger-management classes has been adapted from material Zak Schwartz, a psychologist in private practice in Eugene, designed for the Lane County Department of Youth Services.

The curriculum was originally used in conjunction with probation to assist juvenile offenders in making better decisions. At North Eugene, Department of Youth Services probation officers Jim Leppard, John Aarons, John Crumbley, and Wade Frasier initially trained Bob Cunningham in use of the curriculum. Since being implemented at North Eugene three years ago, some modifications have been made in the curriculum to better meet the needs of high school youth.

Personnel arrangements in anger-management classes differ from school to school. Some schools, such as North Eugene, elect to use their own personnel to facilitate the group after first providing them with access to specialized training. Eugene's Churchill High School pays a private counselor to come in and lead the class. Other schools contract with the Department of Youth Services to send its personnel to lead classes. In the past, Oakridge High School has used two facilitators in its anger-management class for students; one facilitator was from the school's counseling staff and the other was from the Department of Youth Services. And one anger-management class that operated in the Springfield School District last year was led by an intern.

In a world where problems and stressors seem to be on the rise, almost everyone could probably benefit from enrolling in an anger-management class.

In addition to differing personnel arrangements, other specifics vary across schools. At North Eugene the class meets for ninety minutes five days a week and students earn academic credits for the pass/no pass class; at Oakridge the class meets once a week for ninety minutes, during which time students are excused from one of their regular classes, and students do not receive academic credit for the class. As well as offering a class for students, Oakridge has periodically offered an evening anger-management class for parents, and provided free childcare during the sessions.

Personnel in schools that do not offer an ongoing anger-management class for students can become more skilled in working with students in potentially volatile situations by becoming familiar with concepts and techniques typically taught in such classes. Toward this end, the Lane County Department of Youth Services conducts all-day training workshops for school personnel that outline basic strategies teachers can use to help students frame situations differently and ultimately manage their behavior more effectively. Cunningham also has offered one-day workshops for teachers and administrators both inside and outside his own district.

Cunningham believes the optimal time to expose students to the type of curriculum he presents is at the middle-school level. Although he said it is "not too late" to establish new skills and patterns at the high-school level, if such skills were introduced and instilled in middle-school students, high-school classes would be able to concentrate more on helping students to maintain and solidify the skills.

In a world where problems and stressors seem to be on the rise, almost everyone could probably benefit from enrolling in an anger-management class. However, even though anger-management classes are not yet standard fare in today's schools, it is encouraging to know that at least some students are striving to cope skillfully with the challenges that are placed in their path. For their courage to confront difficult personal issues and their commitment to "making it," these students deserve our respect.